

When Anger Burns

by Tim Jackson

It was 5:05 a.m. Angela was awakened by the cry of her infant son. It was the fifth time that night. She didn't know she could feel so tired. Colic was not something she had planned on when she gave birth to Cory just 4 months ago. She longed for a peaceful night's sleep. But it seemed only an elusive dream. Her husband Bill was working the third shift. She was alone.

As Angela dragged herself out of bed and stumbled toward the sound of the crying, she not only felt tired but irritated with her child. "Why is this happening to me? I didn't ask for this. All I want is a good night's sleep. Is that asking too much?"

No matter how gentle she was, all her efforts to soothe her hurting son were futile. Cory's crying intensified. Angela's irritation escalated. "You have no right to destroy my life by constantly stealing my sleep night after night! Shut up!" she screamed as she shook her son.

Her actions frightened her, and Cory too. At that moment, she realized just how easy it would be for her to lash out physically at her defenseless son. She felt her anger burning toward this child whom she dearly loves. The inner turmoil terrified her. She slumped to the floor and began to sob.

Jill works in a hospital as an x-ray technician. She likes her work. And she's good at it. Helping others has always been satisfying to her. However, she is finding it increasingly difficult to get along with one particular doctor. He is so arrogant and overbearing. If she offers a suggestion about a series of tests he has ordered for a patient, he treats her as though she is grossly incompetent and demeans her. He rudely walks away from her right in the middle of her questions. He refuses to return her phone calls. The last time it happened, Jill hit the ceiling. "Who does he think he is anyway? If it weren't for the fact that he is the senior orthopedic surgeon in the hospital and I can't afford to lose my job, I would give him a piece of my mind! Then maybe I'd get a little of the respect I deserve!"

Then there is Paul. He and Roxanne were engaged to be married in a month. However, while driving home from a date one Friday night, Paul's car was hit broadside by a drunk driver. Roxanne was killed instantly. Paul would never be the same. As a reminder of that night, he was left with a shattered knee, and doctors told him he would never regain full use of his leg. That meant a change in Paul's profession as a roofing contractor. But Paul was determined not to take no for an answer.

Five years later, Paul seems to be doing well. He met Cindy, a physical therapist, during the 18 months of rehab for his knee. They hit it off from the start and were married 9 months later. Paul's therapy paid off, and he has 90 percent function of his knee. While all seems to have healed well, things are

not what they appear to be.

Cindy is complaining of Paul's lack of closeness. Whenever she confronts him about something he's done to upset her, he retreats into cool indifference. "It's like he is so far away that I can't get to him no matter how hard I try. It's a frozen barrier of icy silence that I don't know what to do with. I can't live like this anymore. I want someone who wants to be with me."

What do Angela, Jill, and Paul have in common? They are all battling with one of the most powerful emotions known to man—anger. Angela's anger mushroomed to the point of her becoming abusive to her child. Jill felt rage toward her co-worker but kept it inside. Paul pushed his anger underground and decided the best course of action was to bury it and hope it would go away.

Anger. A day rarely goes by that we all don't feel some form of anger. That's why it's important to talk about our anger—what it is, what it does for us, where it comes from, and how we can learn to handle it in constructive instead of destructive ways. Only when the roots of our anger are exposed can we defuse its explosive potential.

What Is Anger?

Anger is one of the most basic human emotions. Everyone gets angry. It's a feeling of being against someone or something. It's a hostile emotion that sets people against each other, or even against themselves. By its nature, anger involves antagonism.

Anger, however, is simpler to define than it is to identify. Emotions of antagonism can take on a wide variety of faces.

Expressions of anger range from the overt, in-your-face brand of open hostility to the cool indifference of a silent stare.

At times, anger can feel like an inner fire. It hits you in the gut. You see red and feel hot and sweaty. Your stomach churns, your blood pressure rises, and your breathing rate increases as if you're laboring under a heavy weight. Outwardly, your body responds to the internal activity with a flushed appearance. You perspire, your nostrils may flare, and your jaw tightens. Many people describe their experience of anger as their blood boiling.

On the other hand, anger can be experienced as compliance on the outside while resentment and hostility run just beneath the surface. The little boy who complies with his teacher's request to sit

down may still be standing up on the inside.

The silent withdrawal and lack of involvement of a spouse is often an indication that one is angrily punishing the other for not doing things his or her way. Sex often becomes a weapon of anger instead of the expression of shared love in a marriage.

Because anger is so common to human experience, and because it is such a threat to relationships, it's not surprising that the Bible has much to say about the dangers, roots, and taming of anger.

To begin with, the Scriptures show the destructive potential of anger. Several Old Testament Hebrew terms provide word pictures of human anger. One word describes the face of an angry person, with nostrils flared (Gen. 39:19; Ex. 4:14).

Another speaks of anger as a burning emotion that once ignited burns furiously hot (Ex. 22:24; 32:10-12). Another word speaks of anger as an outburst of fury that burns, overflows, and consumes everything in its path like a molten wall of lava (Ezek. 22:21,31). It is not surprising, therefore, that several passages of the Bible urge us to get rid of any kind of bitterness, rage, or anger (Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8).

The Bible, however, does not always paint a negative picture of anger. The vast majority of biblical references to words like *anger*, *rage*, *wrath*, and *fury* refer to the anger and wrath of God. These passages, which speak of God's own anger with His enemies, or even with His own people, far outnumber those that tell us to avoid anger.

What the Bible shows us is that anger is neither

right nor wrong until there is a motive. Anger can be productive and loving, just as it can be destructive and selfish. What we need is the discernment that can be developed by those who want to see their anger from the Lord's point of view.

I. Destructive, Selfish Anger. In most cases, the anger that moves a person to do harm to himself or others is selfish. It is the kind of anger that destroys rather than builds up. It is more like a wrecking ball than a hammer.

The first explicit mention of anger in the Bible shows its potential to kill. Genesis 4 tells us the story of Cain and Abel. Both men brought sacrifices to God that reflected their individual occupations. But only Abel brought a sacrifice that pleased the Lord.

"Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast"

(v.5). The word used here is the Hebrew word for burning fury. God came to Cain and tried to help him deal with his seething rage toward Him. God made it clear that He desired to accept Cain, but that he had to come on God's terms and not on his own terms (vv.6-7). God then gave Cain a compelling warning: "If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (v.7).

Cain had to make a choice about how he was going to deal with his anger. His pride was wounded. He was hurt and angry that God would not accept the fruit of his labor the way God accepted the fruit of Abel's work. Yet God gave him an opportunity to deal with his emotions. The older brother could have repented and offered the sacrifice God had asked for. The Lord in turn would have accepted

him. But Cain stubbornly refused to place himself in the protective care of God. Instead, he was determined to take matters into his own hands.

Knowing that he was powerless to lash out directly at God—the true object of his anger—Cain pounced on the one with whom God was pleased: his brother Abel. Cain brutally murdered his brother in cold blood. In fact, his heart had become so hardened that when God came to him and inquired about the whereabouts of his brother, Cain snidely remarked, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (v.9). It was because of his determination to harden his heart and murder his own brother that God cursed Cain to be a wanderer on the earth (vv.11-12).

Unfortunately, the last time we see Cain in the Bible he is still determined

to take his life into his own hands in an angry war against God. Instead of accepting God's curse on him and being a wanderer, he again defies God and builds a city (v.17). Cain is a prime example of a man angrily protecting and providing for himself rather than humbling himself under the mighty, all-sufficient hand of God (1 Pet. 5:6).

Cain paid dearly for his self-protective strategy. Because he trusted his own feelings more than God, his name has become synonymous with the murderous potential of selfish anger. His mistake reminds us that anger rooted in self-centered efforts to care for ourselves never works. Such anger seeks to destroy, not build. It is a consuming passion that devours anything in its path. This is the kind of dangerous emotion James

had in mind when he said, "Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (Jas. 1:20). Man's anger is far different from the godly anger that is good, constructive, and loving.

2. Productive, Loving Anger. Because of the clear prohibitions in the Bible against destructive anger, and our natural aversion to this powerful emotion, many have come to believe the Bible teaches that all anger is sinful. With that assumption in mind, we often misinterpret Ephesians 4:26 (cp. Ps. 4:4) to say, "Don't be angry, because it's sin. Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry." But the text doesn't say that.

The wording of Ephesians 4:26-27 does not support the assumption that anger in and of itself is sinful. The four imperative verbs found in these verses

make the translation clear. The apostle Paul commands us to “be angry.” But he doesn’t stop there. This is by no means a wholesale endorsement of indiscriminate anger (verse 31 makes that abundantly clear). The first command is qualified by the three prohibitions that follow.

Be Angry. God knows that anger is an important and necessary emotion for a healthy person living in a fallen world. The preceding verse (v.25) sets up the context of truth-telling in relationships. We are to stop pretending and “put off falsehood and speak truthfully” to our neighbors. Being honest about our anger, therefore, is something we cannot avoid. The command is this: Be angry about how your sin harms you and others, and how others’ sin harms them and you.

John Stott, in his

commentary on Ephesians 4:26, says, “The verse recognizes that there is such a thing as Christian anger, and too few Christians either feel or express it. Indeed, when we fail to do so, we deny God, damage ourselves, and encourage the spread of evil” (*The Message Of Ephesians*, p.185).

Paul realized the potential for devastating harm that can come from unbridled rage. That is his reason for giving three qualifying prohibitions that follow this call to be angry.

Don’t Sin. The command is not to avoid anger, but to avoid *sinful* anger. If we don’t keep antagonistic emotions on a tight leash, they will cease to be useful in restraining sin, and instead will begin to multiply it. Anger toward those who possess more than we do rationalizes stealing (v.28). Anger stirred

up by a bad conscience enables us to deny the truth, twist it, and say all kinds of unloving things about others (v.29). Our anger can grieve the Holy Spirit (v.30), and if we resist His gentle prodding our anger can degenerate into the sin of bitterness (v.31). Bitterness siphons off passion for life. It displaces faith and love. And once faith and love are gone, the downward spiral to additional sins of cynicism and malicious living follows (v.31).

Don't Nurse Anger. “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” commands us to deal with our anger as soon as we are aware of it. Don't stuff it inside and brood over it. It will only fester. Take it out of the dark and expose it to the light. Let the truth burn away your selfish rage before it grows and deepens and hardens.

This command probably reflects the Old Testament practice of paying off debts and returning borrowed goods prior to sunset so as not to cause undue hardship on the other person (Dt. 24:13-15). Likewise, we are commanded to deal with anger promptly so that we will avoid undue relational hardship.

Don't Give Satan An Edge. “Do not give the devil a foothold” reflects a progression in Paul's series of commands. Satan knows how to exploit anger that is selfish. Once he has us nursing and justifying our selfish anger, he knows we are not far from hatred, vengeance, a refusal to forgive, and violence.

We need to keep in mind, however, that there is a fine line between anger that is loving and anger that is selfish. Complete avoidance of anger is another way of giving Satan an edge.

Unfortunately, many people avoid anger at all costs because they have experienced the volatile emotion of anger that is terrifying to deal with in themselves and in others. According to Ephesians 4:26, that is not an option God gives us.

We play into the devil's hands not only when we follow our anger into sin, but when we allow sinful self-protection to keep us from obeying God's command, "In your anger do not sin." Few occasions give our enemy more freedom than when the children of God fail to love enough to be angry.

Anger and love are not mutually exclusive. They can be two different sides of the same coin. Righteous anger in a compassionate person can be very productive for the well-being of others.

What Angers God?

The Bible makes it clear that while God is slow to anger (Ex. 34:6-7), there is much that His love causes Him to hate and despise and punish.

He is slowly but surely angered by those who repeatedly make choices that rob Him of the honor He deserves. This anger is not only for Himself but for the interests of all who need to be in a right relationship with Him.

God is slowly but surely angered by our stubborn refusal to live by faith, apart from which we can't please Him (Heb. 11:6). Our commitment to live by sight is an affront to the One who invites us to trust Him with the longings of our hungry souls. It is in our willingness to live by faith that He is honored and glorified.

God's anger burned against Moses when at first he refused to accept God's plan for him to lead Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 4:14). God was angry with those who took advantage of widows and orphans (22:22-24), with those who were against His people (15:7), and with idolatrous people who chose idols over Him (32:8-10). God's wrath will one day be poured out on all who are faithless and disobedient (Eph. 5:5-6; Col. 3:5-6).

In Matthew 23, Jesus displayed His Father's anger against the hypocritical Pharisees. He was angry with them for their meticulous attention to things that really didn't matter to God (like tithing spices) while blatantly neglecting the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness (v.23). He called them “snakes” and “a brood

of vipers,” warning them that unless there was an inner change of heart they would not escape hell (v.33). That's righteous anger!

John Stott reminds us that we should be angered by the things that anger God. “In the face of blatant evil we should be indignant not tolerant, angry not apathetic. If God hates sin, His people should hate it too. If evil arouses His anger, it should arouse ours also. ‘Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake Thy law’ (Ps. 119:53). What other reaction can wickedness be expected to provoke in those who love God?” (*The Message Of Ephesians*, p.186).

God's anger is not an aberration of love but an extension of His love. The Old Testament writers confirm the love-anger link with the statement, “You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to

anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Ps. 86:15; cp. Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Ps. 103:8; 145:8). Yes, God is angered by our individual sins, but He is patient with us. He is more enraged with those whose consistent pattern of living is one of rebellion and coldhearted disobedience.

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Leviticus 26:27-28 demonstrates how God's anger is kindled against those who repeatedly disobey Him in spite of His graciousness and blessing:

*If in spite of this you still
do not listen to Me but
continue to be hostile*

*toward Me, then in My
anger I will be hostile
toward you, and I Myself
will punish you for your
sins seven times over.*

It was almost 700 years before Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees in Matthew 23 that the prophet Micah made it clear to the people of his day what was important to God: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

So, you see, the problem is not with anger as an emotion in and of itself. If it were, God couldn't get angry and still be holy. The root problem is in the source and function of our anger.

Where Does Selfish Anger Come From?

A couple sat at opposite ends of the couch in my office. “He just sits in front of the TV and watches sports. When I try to talk to him, he never hears me,” she fumed. “I might as well be a million miles away. Then, when he comes to bed he wants sex. Of all the nerve. He makes me so mad I could just scream!”

From the sound of it, this wife’s anger seems to come from a source outside of herself—namely, her husband. At first blush, we would probably agree. But are we merely reactors to our environment? What kinds of things affect us?

External Sources Of Anger. Generally, we see the cause of our anger as something outside of ourselves. Most of the time

we do not see ourselves as being directly responsible for our anger. Like the wife that is mentioned above, we feel that we’re merely reacting to external stimuli. “After all,” we reason, “if he hadn’t treated her so poorly, then she wouldn’t have gotten angry.” External factors do affect us.

People Are Selfish.

How often have you heard a frustrated husband say, “She never thinks about me and considers what I want. It’s all her and what she wants”? Or a father who thinks that all his teenage son wants is his wallet and the car keys.

It’s true. Whether we like to admit it or not, we all essentially live for ourselves more often than not. Looking out for number one is as natural as breathing. We’re bent that way because of inherited sin. And if that’s true, then we have precious

little time left over to look out for each other's interests the way we are called to do (Phil. 2:4).

Life Is Unfair. Have you ever felt like this: "Why don't I ever get a break? I work just as hard (maybe harder) than the next guy. So why does he get the promotion and I don't?" Other people seem to get all the breaks. Do you ever wonder why you always seem to get stuck with the short end of the stick?

I must confess that I have found it difficult to "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Rom. 12:15). In graduate school, it was hard to see others get large anonymous checks in their mailbox to pay their school bills when my box was noticeably empty. I was working a fulltime job to pay for school and provide for my family. Those rejoicing recipients didn't even work. It didn't seem

fair. It wasn't. And that's hard to swallow. It raised doubts about what I was doing wrong and why I wasn't being blessed like they were.

Life Is Hard. Doesn't it seem as if your life is cursed at times? The truth is, *it is!* We are living under a curse (Gen. 3:14-19). Life is supposed to be difficult. It's filled with modern-day thorns and thistles. Jesus said there would be trouble in our lives (Jn. 16:33).

Cars were a curse in my family. It seemed that as soon as we would get the transmission repaired, the fuel pump would go out. Then it would be tires, brakes, a new radiator, and then the muffler. And it would invariably happen just prior to vacation.

Although the selfishness of others, the unfairness of life, and living under a curse are all realities to contend with, the Scriptures

also teach that the real source of anger is *internal* rather than *external*.

Internal Sources Of Anger. Because of our outward focus on external issues, we often fail to recognize that our anger is caused by our realization that we are not getting what we want when we want it. Like an infant who is feeling the hunger pangs of an empty tummy and demanding to have them satisfied with food, we too feel the pain of disappointed desires.

Disappointed Desires.

In James 4:1-3 we are told why there is so much angry conflict in our lives:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel

and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

It is the desires that battle within us that fuel our conflicts. We want something that really matters to us. Something gets in our way and prevents us from getting what we want. And we get angry about it.

God has created us with the desire for love and respect, and with a longing to be enjoyed and to know that we matter. All of the lesser desires for a new car, a raise, a nicer house, a spouse, a child, or better health are all linked to these core desires for love and relationship. Ultimately, the desires that battle within us are those things we believe we *must*

have to survive in life.

Take Bill, for example. He wants a new car. There's nothing wrong with that, but he wants it because he thinks he needs it to feel he is finally successful as a businessman. He asks God for it. He finds a nice sporty red one. He's excited. He applies for a loan and gets turned down because he doesn't make enough money. So he asks God for a raise, but his boss says no. Bill feels angry with his boss, the bank, and with himself because his goal of getting that car has been blocked. Disappointment is appropriate. But Bill's anger indicates that the car meant more to him than it should have.

But what if our desires are not as trivial as a new car? The body's demand for rest, the longing for love, the desire for respect, and the hunger to make a difference are indeed

legitimate. These are basic longings of the human body and heart. They cry out for satisfaction. But in an imperfect world of self-centered people, even those legitimate desires will never be fully satisfied by the best of relationships or by the best of circumstances. Thus we live in a painful world as hurting people with disappointed desires. And at times we are terrified.

Dreaded Fear. The fear that grips our hearts is a fear that grows out of a lack of faith and confidence that God is really who He says He is: "That He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). The painful experiences of life reinforce the belief that no one, including God Himself, seems to have enough goodness and strength to provide the level of safety and security we desire.

Once we eliminate God

from the picture, we must find some way to survive in this world. So we take matters into our own hands and look to others around us to get what we want. And when we do, we become idolaters. Because we can't control God, we fashion a god of our own making that we think we *can* control. We become like Cain, angry rebels who hate God (Jas. 4:4).

Determined Rebellion.

In our angry rebellion against God, we look to others to provide what only God can supply—security in an insecure world. But our fear is intensified. We don't feel more secure now that we're in charge. We feel less secure. We fear that we don't have what it takes to make it on our own. So we need others to agree with our plans. But we fear they won't cooperate and give us what we want. We see other people as having the power

to make or break our plans for life. And when they fail to cooperate with our agenda, when they block our way, we become enraged with them because they are a threat to our fragile sense of security. We also get angry with ourselves because we feel weak in needing anybody.

To compensate for our fear of what others can and would do to us if they really knew how insecure and desperate we are, we make angry demands of others in hopes that we can intimidate them into cooperating with us.

Unfulfilled Demands.

Our angry rebellion against God forces us to demand that others fill in for Him. When others fail us, as they inevitably will, unfulfilled demands give rise to angry battles.

James said that having self-indulgent motives is the reason we don't receive the

things we ask from God (Jas. 4:3). Most of what we ask for has nothing to do with a deepening desire to trust God and serve others more effectively. Most of the time, our desire is not to have our hearts possessed, ruled, and provided for by God, but rather to have something of His creation that we think is necessary for our well-being. When someone or something blocks that desire, anger flares up. Anger hurts less than our fear and helps to dull the pain because it makes us feel more in control. But God is not interested in encouraging the illusion that a world under our control would be safer than a world under His control.

Asking God to meet our needs is one thing. He urges us to bring to Him the desires of our heart. But when those desires, no matter how legitimate,

become demands, then we unwittingly change from pleading children into arrogant rebels who are against God and out for ourselves.

The solution for our anger, then, requires a growing and deepening confidence in the presence and promises of One we cannot see. We must, through the disappointments, losses, and maddening frustrations of life, learn to believe that our well-being lies not in our demands but in His hands. We must be changed from within by the conviction that He *is* with us, that He *knows* what we need, that He *alone* is able to provide for us, and that *nothing* is more important than learning to trust Him in this imperfect and frightening world.

What Does Our Anger Do For Us?

Most of us would probably agree that much of our anger is wrong and should be avoided. But if we hate our anger as much as we say we do, why do we hang on to it? The answer, in part, is that we cling to it because we fail to recognize the purpose behind our antagonistic strategies. It is what we believe our anger does for us that keeps us hanging on to it.

We nurture our anger because, consciously or unconsciously, we believe it functions for us in these three ways: (1) It protects us from additional pain, (2) it deflects responsibility away from our inadequate love for others, and (3) it keeps people at a manageable distance to ensure that we don't have

to risk giving our hearts to others and get hurt in the process. Let's look at each of these functions of anger individually.

I. Self-protection.

I hate going to the dentist because I hate pain. But I still go to the dentist. And I even pay him to hurt me by drilling out a cavity. Why? Because I hate the thought of *more* pain. If I refuse to deal with a little pain now, I will have to deal with greater pain later when the decay in my tooth reaches the nerve. This is the wisdom of preventive dentistry.

So how do I live as an emotional being in a world that provides a regular dose of pain every day? Rather than facing my pain (remember my disappointed longings), I will often choose to be angry because anger is easier to control than pain and disappointment. It's easier for me to be angry

with my wife than to face the ache of her cool indifference. It's easier to tell off my boss than to tell him how much he hurt me.

What I'm telling others by my anger is, "Don't expect much from me because I'm too wounded to care about you." And when I expend all my energy protecting myself, there's nothing left to protect others from my failure to love them.

King Saul's name is synonymous with such self-protective anger. Behind his anger was his fear. He felt threatened by the military successes and growing fame of David (1 Sam. 18:5-9). Saul felt sure that David's intent was to steal the kingdom. Yet Saul's real problem was not with his servant but with the Lord. He was told at one point by the prophet Samuel that the Lord had rejected him as king because of his

disobedience (15:22-29).

Saul's response confirmed Samuel's words. Instead of repenting honestly of his sin and placing himself in the hands of God, Saul adopted a murderous strategy of self-protection (18:10-11). Determined to protect his own self-interests, he remained David's enemy until his death (v.29).

2. Deflection. Anger often shows up when we are caught red-handed in a wrong. Instead of feeling the weight of our sin and accepting responsibility for our actions, we get angry. We use our anger as an offensive weapon against those who expose and shame us. We try to turn the tables on them to get the attention off ourselves. We try to intimidate them into accepting the message, "I'm not the problem here, you are!"

King Saul also

demonstrated the deflective use of anger. When his plan to trap and kill David at a New Moon feast was foiled, he became furious with his son Jonathan, who attempted to make an excuse for David's absence. Instead of acknowledging that his evil plot had been frustrated, Saul lashed out with vicious words meant to shamefully shred the heart of his son: "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you?" (1 Sam. 20:30). Saul's cruel remarks were designed to deflect the spotlight from himself toward his son whom he labeled as a traitor and a fool.

3. Distancing. Anger can also be used in an attempt to make sure that others don't get close enough to discover our

weakness. Like porcupines, we use barbs of antagonism and intimidation to keep others at a distance, thereby protecting the soft flesh of our own insecurities or flaws.

Think of the people you find intimidating. Maybe it's your boss, your father, or your spouse. Often they are people who use anger to create space for themselves. They may come across as strong and confident. But underneath the bravado they are weak. They can't afford to allow anyone to get close enough to see their fear or their insecurity.

While King Saul is an Old Testament example of anger, King Herod is a notorious New Testament example. He too used his rage for purposes of self-protection. Behind the angry show of force was a terrified, weak person attempting to create a margin of safety for himself.

His paranoid fear surrounding the birth of the King of the Jews led him to order the slaughter of hundreds of Jewish baby boys 2 years old and under around Bethlehem (Mt. 2:16). With similar anxiety, he mercilessly murdered his wife and all his sons for fear that they would kill him to take his throne. It was said in his day that it was better to be a pig in Israel than one of Herod's sons because you had a better chance of survival. Herod trusted no one but himself. He had no concept of the security that is found in God.

The self-protective, deflecting, and distancing functions of anger can feel like they are working for us. As a result, we might blindly hang on till death. King Saul relied on his anger until his dying day. And in the end, he chose to die as he lived—a coward who refused to face his pain

by ending his own life (1 Sam. 31:4). His angry commitment to controlling his world cost him everything. He died alone and unloved.

What Are The Ways We Mishandle Anger?

The Scriptures teach that the problem with most of us is that we are too quickly angered, and that once our anger is ignited it rages more like an untamed forest fire than a campfire. James made it clear that our hot-tempered anger doesn't accomplish God's purposes in our lives: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (Jas. 1:19-20).

When we take our anger into our own hands, we end up destroying others or ourselves, and usually both. Ultimately, selfish anger directed toward others will lead to various degrees of murderous activity toward those whom we feel have threatened, hurt, belittled, shamed, or controlled us (Mt. 5:21-22). “Get in my way, and you’ll pay” is our motto. Anger directed toward ourselves will fuel suicidal kinds of behavior that strip vitality from life. Either way, anger handled *our* way always results in devastating destruction.

I. Repression. We learn early in life that anger is a frightening emotion. So we work to avoid it at all costs. Most often, we end up pretending we are not angry in hopes that it will go away and no one will get hurt. After all, we reason, anger is not socially acceptable in my church, home, or workplace.

When a child grows up in a home where she is regularly subjected to angry, demeaning outbursts from her alcoholic father toward her mother, she learns that anger is viciously cruel. She vows that she will never become like him. So she stuffs her feelings inside and marries a weak man who is emotionally dead and very nonthreatening to her. In later life, this woman will probably end up depressed because of his lack of meaningful involvement. Her way to try to protect herself failed to bring her the joy she had hoped for.

Much of the depression suffered by individuals today is a result of anger. Many depressed people have chosen to shut down and no longer engage with their world because they have discovered that all their best efforts to make life work on their terms have failed. Nothing works

to give them what they deeply desire, so they quit. It's hopeless.

That's a description of the prophet Jonah at the end of the Old Testament book bearing his name (Jon. 4:1-10). He wanted God to destroy the city of Nineveh. Instead, God spared it. Jonah was angry with God. He was preoccupied with his agenda and completely missed the compassionate heart of the God of Israel. The prophet's depression was fueled by his obsession with his own needs, which blinded him to the needs of others.

Those who stuff their anger say that feelings only clutter up their lives and make it too messy. So the best way to handle emotions, especially something as volatile as anger, is to swallow hard and pretend. "After all, that's just the way things are in our house. It's not a

big deal. Don't make a federal case out of it." These are common responses from stuffers. After a while, they end up feeling nothing at all—neither pain nor joy. Emotional deadness is applauded as being "emotionally stable." Eventually they become mannequin-like automatons who function well but touch no one deeply.

2. Quick And Shallow Confession.

Very close to repression, this mishandling of anger too quickly and easily says, "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't feel angry. It's sin and it's wrong. Please forgive me." All too often it is the quick-confession mentality that doesn't want to take the time to understand where the volcanic energy of one's anger comes from or what it is directed toward.

Yes, we are to get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger (Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8).

But to assume that we can simply will away an emotion with sheer determination is foolishness. What we need is to explore our anger and expose its roots.

3. Volcanic

Expression. Outbursts of anger are aided by the myth that says, “If you want to be real, you must be honest about your feelings. Don’t hold back. Let the world know what you are feeling. To get rid of the pressure that is building up inside of you, go ahead and get it out.”

While we must learn to express our feelings, such expression must be done with discernment and regard for others. Those who express anger without love are “emotional dumpers.” They back up their truckload of emotional garbage and unload it all over your front lawn.

God never gives us the

luxury of expressing our emotions without regard for damages (Eph. 4:29). In fact, the prophet Amos recorded God’s outrage against those who vented their anger without compassion:

This is what the Lord says: “For three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not turn back My wrath. Because he pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion, because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked, I will send fire upon Teman that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah” (Amos 1:11).

God alone is in a position to express vengeful judgment. He alone is patient and loving and perfect enough to be able to use anger to give people the punishment they deserve. That is why Paul told us, “Do not take

revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

Now that we have seen how not to handle our anger, we can move toward constructive ways of dealing with our anger.

How Can We Handle Our Anger In Godly Ways?

1. Acknowledge Your Anger To God.

Don't pretend that you don't get angry. We all do. Don't water down your anger by labeling it as "frustration" or "irritation." Call it what it is. Be honest with yourself, and then with God. He knows anyway (Jer. 17:10; Heb. 4:12). Pour out your heart to Him and tell Him what you are feeling. Many of the psalms of

David begin as a prayer to God expressing the fear and anger he was feeling.

2. Learn To Get Angry Slowly. Angry words spoken quickly are usually regretted later. Take time to make sure that you have good reason to be angry. Learn to avoid jumping to unwarranted conclusions. Listen and ask questions. Second-guess your own reactions. There are many good reasons why James told us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry (Jas. 1:19). One of the best reasons is that God Himself is slow to get angry, and our goal in life is to let Him form Christlike character in us.

King David, who knew about anger, said, "In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent" (Ps. 4:4). Use moments of solitude in your life to reflect prayerfully on

your anger. Examine your motives. Ask yourself questions like these:

- What did I feel angry about today?
- Where is my anger coming from?
- Why did I feel so threatened that I believed my anger was a justifiable defense?
- Why is my anger so intense over something so small?
- Is my anger for the benefit of another or is it directed against another?
- Did my anger further God's interests or my own interests?
- Did I provoke anger in someone else today?

After having wrestled with these questions privately, ask a trusted friend to help you test your thinking. In asking yourself these probing questions, you will be forced to discern if

your anger was characteristic of Jesus' example of handling anger or more characteristic of Cain, Saul, or Jonah's handling of anger.

Because Jesus was secure in His relationship with His Father, the anger He expressed did not reflect quick, touchy, self-protective hostility. Rather, He was angry with evil that was against His Father's plan and that which threatened to do harm to people whom He loved. His anger was accompanied by grief, and its expression was shaped by love (Mt. 23:37).

3. Change Your Beliefs About God.

Whether we realize it or not, most of our feelings are based on our deeply held beliefs about where life and security and significance are found. Our anger problem is rooted not in feelings, but in what we believe about God.

The challenge according to the New Testament, therefore, is not to change our feelings but to change our thinking. In the awareness of what God has done for us (Rom. 1–11) the apostle Paul urged us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). In time, renewed patterns of thinking will result in changed feelings.

All emotions, including anger, are therefore useful to help us track down the real beliefs of our heart. Feelings of rage can be used to begin to trace the roots of that antagonism. In the process we can discern if that anger is rooted in our confidence in God or if it is a self-centered response rooted in a selfish spirit demanding that things go our way.

Whether we believe our well-being is in the hands of God, in our circumstances,

or in others is a most basic factor in learning how to deal with anger.

4. Confess Wrong Beliefs And Repent.

This is not merely a confession that you had sinful, angry feelings. It goes much deeper, to the faulty belief system that fuels your anger. It means repenting of your stubborn commitment to survive in life on your terms instead of on God's terms. It means repenting of the angry resentment you have held toward Him for not doing things your way. It means repenting of your belief that He really isn't all that good, and that He can't be trusted. And it means repenting of all the damage your angry demands have inflicted on God and on others. This will most likely involve reaching out to those you've harmed with your anger and asking for forgiveness (see the RBC

booklet *When Forgiveness Seems Impossible* CB941).

But repentance means turning toward something as well. It means a conscious commitment to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7)—to recklessly abandon yourself into the loving arms of your heavenly Father, who delights in giving good gifts to His children (Mt. 7:11; Jas. 1:17). It means choosing to live by the belief that He exists, and that He does reward those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6), even when things don't turn out the way you think they should (vv.35-40). It means trusting Him as the only provision for your hungry soul and believing that you have nothing to fear because of your confidence in His abiding goodness and love (Ps. 23:4; 27:1-14).

When repentance takes place at that deep level, the insecurity will begin to melt away and be replaced with

confidence. Angry demandingness will become repulsive and unnecessary. Its power will weaken as it is replaced with the courage to love the way you have been loved. At that point you can begin to exercise control over your anger.

5. Place Your Anger Under New Management. While what we feel cannot be directly changed, we can change what we *believe* by surrendering ourselves to the Spirit and Word of God. Under His influence and enablement we will find our anger increasingly shaped and restrained by a new kind of self-control. The apostle Paul said this self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Because God is slow to anger, we can expect that when our life is under His management we will take on some of the same qualities of patient

restraint. Because God's heart was revealed to us in His Son, we can also expect to begin growing in what the Bible calls "the mind of Christ."

✿ Under God's management, we will take on qualities of patient restraint. ✿

Paul talked about having this mind of Christ when he wrote, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). The Son of God could take that attitude because His security was not found in circumstances or strategies of self-protection. Instead, His confidence was in the knowledge that whatever He needed would be provided at just the right

moment by His heavenly Father.

Jesus could risk and sacrifice His own life for others because He knew that His future was not in the hands of those who mocked Him and drove spikes into His hands and feet. Their power over Him was merely a temporary allowance necessary for Him to live and die for those He loved.

Placing our anger and our well-being in the hands of God will help us better understand this mind of Christ. It will also help us develop a healthy fear of the anger that God reserves for His enemies.

Placing our anger under God's management will not dissolve and evaporate all anger. But it will free us to express a new and godly anger toward the kind of sin in ourselves and others that slowly angers the heart of God.

The Ultimate Perspective Of Anger

A day is coming when this world will see an outpouring of the anger of God that will put all other anger in perspective. In that fateful hour, the Son of God will unleash the justice and vengeance of His Father against all who have attempted to find and defend life on their own terms (2 Th. 1:5-10).

The good news is that by believing the truth about God's Son and what He did for us on a Roman cross, we can avoid that day of consuming judgment. The apostle John wrote, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (Jn. 3:36). The offer is a gift in exchange for belief. It is not

a reward for performance. It is pure, undeserved kindness. Yet with the offer also comes a warning. Hebrews 10:31 adds, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." This applies to everyone who knowingly resists the will of God. But it has a special and eternal meaning for those who persistently and stubbornly resist God's offer of salvation.

How we respond to God's offer will determine our eternal destiny.

How we respond to God's offer will determine our eternal destiny. It will also determine how we work through the more immediate issues of our own anger.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

The Anger Workbook

by Les Carter, Frank Minirth, and Paul Meier
(Thomas Nelson, 1993).

Getting The Best Of Your Anger by Les Carter
(Baker Book House, 1997).

OTHER RELATED RBC COUNSELING BOOKLETS

When Help Is Needed—a biblical view of counseling (CB931).

When Words Hurt—verbal abuse in marriage (CB011).

When Violence Comes Home—help for victims of spouse abuse (CB951).

When Forgiveness Seems Impossible—knowing when and how to forgive (CB951).

When Hope Is Lost—dealing with depression (CB973).

The complete text of all the RBC counseling booklets is available at www.discoveryseries.org.

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